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THE INCARNATION

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The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is, at bottom, the claim that Jesus Christ was God incarnate. As traditionally understood, this does not mean that Jesus was a specially appointed prophet or that he was adopted by God or even that he was pre-existent and existentially unique. No, the doctrine of the Incarnation is more radical that any of that. Its claim is that the human being Jesus of Nazareth was and is God.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' identity claims assumed divine prerogatives (i.e., having the ability to forgive sin; being the Lord of the Sabbath; being God's unique Son and the Son of Man of Daniel 7; asserting authority over the Torah). Such assertions implying that he stood in the place of God didn't go over well with either the Jewish community in which Jesus had lived or in the larger Hellenistic and Greek worlds. How could God be born? How could the divine being literally walk the earth as a human who ate, drank, and slept? The very idea was, to borrow a phrase used in a similar context by the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians, 'a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1: 23 NRSV). Nevertheless, that is the doctrine that became the received view in the traditional Christian Church.

This essay will consider the nature of this essential Christian doctrine, examine a particularly thorny philosophical problem to which it gives rise, and discuss three potential responses proposed by its defenders.

The doctrine

In the third century CE, the Christian Church expended its collective theological energy coming to terms with the relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father. It was in the fourth century that the focus switched to the humanity of Christ. Orthodox Christianity had always affirmed Jesus' physical reality. Although some Gnostic sects had taught that Christ, while divine (indeed, *because* divine) was not physically embodied, early church theologians as far back as at least the writer of the letters of John (generally believed to have been written at the very end of the first century) stressed that Jesus Christ had a physical body.

The meat of the doctrine of the Incarnation can be found in the Nicene Creed and the 'Chalcedonian Definition.' Here is the relevant section of the former:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

The emphasis here is clearly on the divinity of Christ. During the early fourth century the Christian Church was divided over the nature of Christ. Arius and his followers argued that Jesus Christ was pre-existent but was not eternal; rather, the Son had been God's first creation. He was thought unique and in many ways vastly superior to other created entities, but he was not of the same substance as God the Father. Although the vote was hotly contested, in 325 the bishops at the Council of Nicea explicitly rejected Arianism and embraced the doctrine that the Son was not only pre-existent but was also 'begotten not made', that is, consubstantial with the Father.

While the Nicene Creed made explicit Christ's divinity and asserted his humanity, it wasn't until almost 130 years later that a more fully developed account of the relationship of Christ's humanity to his divinity was hammered out at the Council of Chaceldon in 451. The key Christological claim is that Jesus Christ is 'fully God and fully human.' The humanity that Christ exemplifies is like ours except that his is not stained with sin. Importantly, this implies that while the incarnate God is the Word made flesh, he is not *simply* the Word made flesh. The statement endorsed at this council (known as the 'Chalcedonian Definition') insists that Christ not only had a human body but a human 'rational soul.' In other words, he was not just the soul of God the Son housed in a human body: he had a human mind as well. Had he not had the conative and cognitive aspects of humanity, he would have not been 'fully human.'

The chief philosophical objection

There are various objections that can be raised against the doctrine of the Incarnation. Some are epistemological. For example, it might be thought that even if the accounts of the life of Christ in the Gospels are presumed to be accurate, there is nothing there (or in any other records) that could justify the claim that Christ is literally God. This may or may not be a good objection to belief in the Incarnation, but it will not be the subject of our focus here. Instead, the objection that will occupy us is metaphysical in nature. In the most straightforward of terms, it goes like this:

It is a necessary truth that God is omnipotent and omniscient. This truth stems from the very concept of God: no being that lacked these properties would qualify as divine. Furthermore, it is also a necessary truth that no human being can have infinite knowledge and power; to be human is to be finite. And now we can see why it is impossible for there to be a being who is both fully divine and fully human. To be fully divine is to meet all of those conditions necessary for divinity. Such a person will then be omnipotent, and omniscient. To be fully human, on the other hand, requires a person to be limited in power and knowledge. So a person who is fully divine and fully human will be an omnipotent, omniscient being who is limited in power and knowledge. But that is a logically inconsistent description. Therefore, the doctrine of the Incarnation is not even possibly true: it represents a metaphysical impossibility.

Let's try to be a bit more formal in our presentation of the problem. The argument intends to show

[C] It is not possible that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human.

Here's a more explicit formulation of the argument:

1 Necessarily, anything that is God (i.e., divine) is omnipotent. (premise)
2 Necessarily, anything that is human is not omnipotent. (premise)
3 Suppose: It is possible that Jesus Christ is both divine and human. (supposition for reductio)
4 It is possible that Jesus is both omnipotent and human. (from 1, 3)
5 It is possible that Jesus is both omnipotent and not omnipotent. (from 2, 4)
6 But it is not possible that Jesus is both omnipotent and not omnipotent. (premise)

[C] Therefore, it is not possible that Jesus Christ is both divine and human.

Because the heart of this objection to the classical understanding of the Incarnation is a claim of logical inconsistency, let's dub the argument above the 'Inconsistency Argument.' Actually, what we have here is an instance of a more general argument type. I've selected omnipotence to represent all those divine qualities that, on the face of it, would seem to be inconsistent with essential human qualities.

Before trying to figure out how the defender of traditional Christology can best respond, let's make sure we fully appreciate the argument. There are three premises among its seven steps. The first two are alleged necessary truths that derive from the concepts of God and humanity, respectively. The rationale for them was discussed above, and we will have reason to come back to them later. For now we can grant that they have at least a certain prima facie plausibility. The only other genuine premise is step 6, which claims that it is not possible that Jesus Christ be both omnipotent and

not omnipotent. The justification for this premise is none other than the Law of Non-contradiction which says that nothing can be both true and false. So if Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, and if being the former entails being omnipotent and being the latter entails being not omnipotent, then traditional Christology is committed to both the truth and the falsity of the claim that Jesus Christ was omnipotent, and thus to denying the Law of Non-contradiction.

The argument is logically valid, and so the other steps will be true if our premises are true. There are, then, only three ways of rationally avoiding the conclusion: one of the premises must go. Either something can fail to be omnipotent and yet be divine, or something can be omnipotent and yet be human, or something can both have and lack the same property. As we will see, the denial of each one of these premises lines up with a traditional response to this Christological objection.

Denying step 1: the kenotic solution

The first premise of the Inconsistency Argument is that, necessarily, anything that is divine is omnipotent. The traditional concept of the Christian God includes the concept of a being who created the universe *ex nihilo*, and whose power is unlimited. To affirm these things would seem to be nothing other than to affirm God's omnipotence. So in denying the first step does the Christian also deny that God has unlimited power? Not necessarily. Peter Geach (1977) famously argued that Christians should give up the concept of omnipotence in favor of what he termed 'almightiness.' Being 'almighty' would entail that there could be nothing more powerful than God, even if (for technical philosophical and theological reasons we don't have time to get into) God is not omnipotent per se. However, giving up the ascription of omnipotence for these reasons will not help with the Inconsistency Argument, as steps 1 and 2 could easily be recast with 'almighty' in place of omnipotence.

The grounds for a more robust denial of the first step of the Inconsistency Argument can be found in the New Testament itself. The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, had this to say about the Incarnation:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as
> something to be exploited,
> But emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
> (Phil. 2: 5–7 (NRSV)).

The later kenotic tradition (the name of which derives from the Greek word *kenosis* which means 'emptying') interprets this text as claiming that, in some metaphysically serious way, the second person of the Trinity gave up, or emptied himself of, some aspects of his divinity in order to take on humanity. The implication is that the point of the Inconsistency Argument is recognized even here: in order to become human, God the Son had to empty himself of those aspects of his divine nature that were inconsistent with his becoming incarnate as a human being. Omnipotence and

omniscience are prime candidates for what the Son surrendered, although there may have been others as well. Therefore, the kenoticist will say, it's not true that in order to be God a being must be omnipotent because Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully human. Not only do we have a possible counterexample – we have an actual one! (See Feenstra 1989 for a robust defense of kenoticism.)

The problem with this approach is that it appears to gut our concept of God. That is, step 1 is grounded in a widespread and plausible account of the divine nature. According to this view, what it is to be God is to be a being with attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, etc. The worry with the kenotic account of the Incarnation is that in divesting himself of divine properties like omnipotence and omniscience, God the Son thereby ceases to be God. For in order for kenoticism to be of help to the Christological traditionalist, it must not imply that God the Son gave up *divinity* in order to take on humanity.

Notice also that the problem for the Chalcedonian isn't just that omnipotence is apparently inconsistent with genuine humanity, but that so many of the other attributes are too. God is not only all-powerful, but omniscient, necessarily good, eternal, etc. So even if it were possible for a divine being to give up some of his infinite attributes, how could it be that God the Son emptied himself of all of these qualities and yet *remained divine*? It is tempting to understand the kenotic position as implying that the Son gave up his divinity to become human. If the kenoticist insists that the Son's divinity was maintained while many of its distinctive attributes were given up, she will then owe us an account of divinity on which it is possible that God is not omnipotent, omniscient, necessarily good, eternal, etc. (See Senor 1991 for a proposal along these lines.)

Thorny though the aforementioned problem is, it does not represent the most serious objection to the kenotic solution. As noted above, the grounds for kenoticism would seem to be a tacit recognition of the philosophical problem made explicit in the Inconsistency Argument: in order to become human, God the Son had to abandon (at least temporarily) those qualities of divinity that are inconsistent with his human incarnation. Once the Son is suitably emptied, there is no barrier to taking on a human nature. This method of getting around the Inconsistency Argument will work as long as (a) giving up paradigmatic divine qualities is consistent with remaining divine and (b) all the divine qualities that are inconsistent with human nature can be set aside. The first objection we discussed concerns (a). We are now setting our sights on (b).

As we begin to consider (b), note that there is nothing inherently mysterious in the idea of property divestment. You have the ability to divest yourself of some of your current qualities. Suppose you are a married professor of philosophy who lives in New York City. Get divorced, quit your job, and move to Texas and you'll have changed some of your rather important properties. But you've got other properties that you aren't in a position to do anything about (e.g., having been born in the twentieth century). Call properties of this latter sort 'stable properties.' The kenotic strategy depends on the non-stability of all the divine properties that are inconsistent with humanity. For if any of those attributes turn out to be stable, then there will be a property that the incarnate God the Son will both have and lack. And one such

instance is all the Inconsistency Argument needs to show the logical incoherence of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

There are, it would seem, any number of stable divine properties that are apparently inconsistent with human nature. For example, on standard theism, God is the uncreated, necessarily existing creator of all that is other than himself. Yet these qualities, one and all, are both stable and yet apparently inconsistent with a person's having a human nature. Since the kenotic approach leaves us with a human being who is the uncreated, necessarily existing creator of all that is other than himself, one may be excused for thinking that rather little ground has been made against the Inconsistency Argument.

So even if kenoticism can provide grounds for denying step 1 of this particular version of the Inconsistency Argument, it is far from clear that it is a successful strategy for dealing with all such arguments.

Denying step 2: Thomas Morris's 'two minds' reply

Since there will be instances of the Inconsistency Argument that have an unassailable first premise, we must look elsewhere if we are to defend orthodox Christology. Working through the argument's steps in order, let us now consider step 2. What is our ground for thinking that, necessarily, all human beings lack omnipotence?

We might think that the answer to this is rather simple and directly parallel to what we had to say earlier about the divine qualities: it is part of our concept of humanity that humans are finite creatures with fairly limited capacities. We are of a rather small size even when measured by terrestrial standards, and our powers are thus circumscribed by what a being weighing at most a few hundred pounds is capable of. So in the same way that our concept of divinity necessitates that only an omnipotent being counts as divine, our concept of humanity requires that only a being with limited powers (and who thus lacks omnipotence) could be human.

Thomas Morris (1986) has challenged this claim about the concept of humanity (Richard Swinburne 1994 gives a similar defense). Making a distinction between cluster concepts and natural kind concepts, Morris argues that it is only the former whose essence can be known by simple a priori reflection and which will consist of other concepts knowable by reflection. So, for example, our concept of a bachelor is a cluster concept par excellence. By reflection, we can come to know that no one who is married can be a bachelor. However, we do not find out the essence of a natural kind in the same way. Take, for example, our concept of an orange. We might think we could say that an orange is a sweet, orange-colored fruit with a peel. While this is a fair description of a standard orange, we must acknowledge that those of us who are not horticulturists lack the expertise to say that these are necessary conditions of something's falling under the botanical kind *orange*. That is, we could possibly learn that there are types of oranges that are green and sour when ripe. If our concept of an orange were a cluster concept, we'd be in a position to tell the horticulturists, 'No, you apparently don't understand what an orange is: nothing that is green when ripe could *possibly* be an orange.' But we are not in a position to say that. Being an orange is to

be a member of a certain natural kind, and the essences of natural kinds are discovered by empirical investigation rather than conceptual reflection.

What does all this have to do with the Incarnation? Morris thinks that once we understand that our notion of humanity is a natural kind rather than a cluster concept, we will see that many of the convictions we might have about the essence of humanity may, in principle, be overridden in the same way that our conviction that being orange when ripe may be shown to be wrong by botany. Just as being orange in color might be very *common* amongst oranges even if it is not essential for being an orange, so the objector to the Inconsistency Argument can say that while lacking omnipotence might be extremely *common* among humans, it is not an *essential* property of humanity.

Whereas the first response to the Inconsistency Argument held fast to the standard human kind properties, and gave ground on the Son's divine attributes, the current reply does just the reverse. To be fully human, in this sense, is to have a properly functioning human body and mind. Precisely what that consists in will be determined by a complete science of the human person, and not by a priori reflection on our non-scientific concept of humanity. What we currently know of the humankind nature might not obviously preclude the possibility of that nature's becoming intimately associated with a divine nature and all that that involves.

So far we've said nothing about the 'Two Minds' aspect of Morris's position. There are two reasons for appealing to the duality of minds. First, the New Testament contains passages which seem to suggest, for example, that there are things Jesus Christ does not know (see Matthew 24: 36). The second reason for insisting on the Two Minds view is that without it, the defender of orthodoxy may seem to have won the battle but lost the war. By dropping all the relevant features of humanity that were incompatible with the standard divine properties, the Christian is in danger of being left with a picture of Jesus Christ as perhaps technically human but rather little like us.

What makes Morris's Two Minds view distinct from just any orthodox position (as we've seen, the Chalcedonian definition insists that Jesus Christ had both human body and rational soul in addition to the mind of God the Son) is its insistence that during the Son's time on earth, it was the human mind that was primarily that through which God incarnate consciously operated. Taking on and functioning through the consciousness of a human mind can explain how Christ could be both ignorant of some things and yet omniscient: the ignorance is a function of the conscious human mind while omniscience is had in the divine mind. Furthermore, we can suppose that the human mind came to know most things in much the same way that any typical human mind would come to know them. We needn't think of the infant Christ consciously pondering the thoughts of the Godhead if it is the human mind that was the primary vehicle in which conscious thought occurred.

The main problem for the Two Minds view is squaring it with the Chalcedonian Definition's insistence that there is but a single person in the Incarnation. Morris himself sees this difficulty and attempts to make plausible his claim that two minds can be had by a single person. Yet as John Hick (1989) points out, there is a dilemma here for Morris: if there are two distinct minds in the Incarnation, and if the human

mind has access to the divine mind only inasmuch as the divine mind allows it to have (which is Morris's view), then it would seem that the relationship between the mind of God the Son and the human mind of Christ is in principle no different from God the Son's relationship with any other human mind. None of us (including Jesus Christ) has unrestricted access to God the Son's mind; all of us (including Jesus Christ) know just as much of the divine mind as the divine mind chooses to reveal. Morris sees this part of the dilemma as a potential problem and tries to solve it by maintaining that the human and divine minds of God incarnate have a single, shared set of *cognitive and causal powers*. The distinction in the two minds is in their accompanying belief systems, and not in the faculties that produce (or are associated with) them. But if we say there is but one set of causal and cognitive powers, and that these powers are the cognitive and causal powers of God the Son, then it is highly questionable if a genuine human mind, or 'rational soul,' has been taken on at all. So the dilemma is this: either there are two distinct sets of cognitive and causal powers, or there are not. If there are, then the unity of the Incarnation is threatened (and the heresy known as Nestorianism looms), and there is apparently, in principle, no unique relation between the human mind of Christ and the mind of God the Son. If there are not two distinct sets of powers, then it is hard to see that God incarnate had a genuine human mind (and the heresy known as Apollinarianism looms).

One final point in defense of the Two Minds view: it is clear that orthodoxy insists that God the Son took on a complete human nature and that includes taking on a complete human mind or 'rational soul.' So Morris might claim that, to some degree at least, all defenders of the Chalcedon Definition will have to face Hick's dilemma.

Denying step 6: The compositional model

The final premise of the argument comes at step 6, and it asserts that it is not possible that Jesus Christ be both omnipotent and not omnipotent. As claimed above, this is really grounded in what might just be the single most important rule of logic and of rational thought: the Law of Non-contradiction. How, one might reasonably ask, could the believer deny something so basic?

The key, the defender of orthodoxy will say, is that one can affirm the Law of Non-contradiction and yet deny step 6. For Jesus Christ differs from the rest of humanity in one very important respect: he has two natures, one divine and one human. So property ascriptions to him are ambiguous in a way that property ascriptions to the rest of us aren't. When we say that Jesus is omnipotent, what we are really asserting is that Jesus Christ, qua divine nature, is omnipotent. And when we say that Jesus Christ lacks omnipotence, what we are asserting is that Jesus Christ, qua human, lacks omnipotence. Had Christ a single nature, then the claim that he is both omnipotent and not omnipotent would violate the Law of Non-contradiction. But as it is, there is no contradiction in saying that, qua his divine nature Christ is omnipotent and qua his human nature he is not.

Eleonore Stump (2004) and Brian Leftow (2004) offer independent, although strikingly similar accounts of the metaphysics of the Incarnation that they find in

the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The fundamental idea is that God incarnate is a compositional entity composed of God the Son and the human body and mind of Jesus Christ. On this account, the properties that God incarnate has qua divinity are properties that are had by his divine part; similarly, his human properties are had by his human part. This approach puts some flesh on the bones of the qua claim above. The apparent inconsistency is resolved by assigning the properties in question to distinct parts of God incarnate. Just as there are no logical difficulties in saying of an apple that it is red qua its skin and not red qua its core, so there is no logical problem with the claim that Jesus Christ is omnipotent qua his divine part and not omnipotent qua his human part.

The difficulty with this view can be seen if we keep squarely in mind that the doctrine asserts that although there are two natures, there is but one person and hence a single subject of predication. So even if we grant that the divine part is omnipotent and the human part is not omnipotent, we must ask if the compositional God incarnate is omnipotent. If we say that having an omnipotent part, God incarnate himself is omnipotent, then we would seem to be right back where we started: Jesus Christ (who is God incarnate) is a human who is yet omnipotent. But if we go the other way and say that the human part trumps the divine part where omnipotence is concerned, and hence that God incarnate is not omnipotent, then we have a divine being who is not omnipotent. So one might be excused for wondering how the compositional account cuts ice against the Inconsistency Argument. For in the final analysis, it doesn't seem to offer us a way of seeing how Jesus Christ could be both omnipotent and not omnipotent; instead, it shows only how he could have an omnipotent part and a non-omnipotent part. But these things were never in doubt. No one ever thought that, say, his left eye brow was omnipotent. And the Christological traditionalist has always claimed that he was omnipotent in his divine nature. The point at issue is whether the person who is God incarnate can be said to be omnipotent, not whether he has an omnipotent part.

There is another difficulty inherent in the compositional picture. Orthodoxy is clear that there is only a single person in the Incarnation. The person who is God the Son and the person who is Jesus Christ are the same person. However, the friend of the compositional picture cannot assert this. For God the Son is, on the compositional view, but a proper part of the whole that is God incarnate. The conclusion must be either that God incarnate is a person too, and so there are two persons in the Incarnation (but this is the heresy of Nestorianism pure and simple), or God incarnate has a person as a part (i.e., God the Son) but is not a person himself. But then Jesus Christ, who the tradition tells us just *is* God incarnate, is an impersonal conglomerate with a personal part. Yet surely this is not theologically acceptable to the Chalcedonian tradition that claims that the two natures are joined in such a way that they are 'concurring in one Person' and that the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, is 'in all things like unto us.' The compositional view would seem to have trouble with both of these claims: the God incarnate has a person as a part but *is* not a person, and hence seems to be not much like us at all.

Conclusion

In a brief essay such as this, it is not possible to explore the philosophical difficulties and attempted solutions in anything like the detail they deserve. Nor is it possible to so much as mention all the issues that should have a hearing. What can be said by way conclusion is simply this: what the doctrine of the Incarnation proposes is deeply mysterious, and while a good prima facie case can be made for its being logically inconsistent, the defender of the tradition is not without resources in attempting to cast doubt on the Inconsistency Argument.

See also Christianity (Chapter 6), Religious pluralism (Chapter 20), Inclusivism and exclusivism (Chapter 21), Omniscience (Chapter 24), Omnipotence (Chapter 25), Creation and divine action (Chapter 30), The Trinity (Chapter 49), Revelation (Chapter 50), Resurrection (Chapter 52), Sin and salvation (Chapter 53), Miracles (Chapter 55).

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